

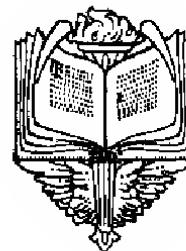
Gift of Dr. G. Deutsch.

Box
A-92
661

Religious Duties and Responsibilities

of

American Israel



For earnest consideration

To All Interested in Jewish Congregational Life
and especially

To the Members of the Y. M. H. A.

By

Rabbi Joseph Zeisler
Temple "Moses Montefiore"
Marshall, Texas

Israel's Duties and Responsibilities

Man's Divine right is to reign on earth with undivided authority over each period of life. Every talent must be used for the improvement of his own and the betterment of the conditions of humanity at large. To this service every human being must unreservedly consecrate body and soul, with all his energies and capacities. Life puts forth a claim for the peculiar powers, endowments and faculties with which we may be providentially endowed or entrusted. Much reliance is thus placed upon human exertion, conditions, as well as the physical and intellectual resources of every age and station, which supply us with the opportunities and advantages to promote not alone our own well-being but that of our fellow-men too.

The responsibilities for the well-being of the human race accrue to the young by virtue of their providential endowments. They devolve upon them, by an inevitable destiny; for they are the predestined successors to those who now wield moral influence, authority and power.

The flight of years makes haste, to bring them into contact with burdens and responsibilities. They are moving incessantly onward, toward the great inheritance which they can not elude or devolve on others. Those, who are young today will govern mankind tomorrow. They will have to manage the material interests of society; they will have to plan and prosecute its improvement; they will become the teachers of the human race, the world's lawgivers and dispensors of justice. They must gird their loins, and steadfastly follow the footsteps of their fathers, to take upon themselves the burden of action, which in turn, is destined for each coming generation, to again transmit its virtues and achievements to a still later posterity.

We look to the intelligent Jewish young men for succor in our communal activities, without which reaction and probably ignominious retrogression will be unavoidable. They alone are fully adapted for the special exigencies that exist in our communal life. Men of advanced age are generally found essentially unfit for the new duties and enterprises time



and condition presses upon us. For prudent counsels, and the conduct of grave negotiations, for the conservation of time-honored institutions, for the safe management of trusts and established interests of human society, we must look to the serene, unimpatient wisdom of more advanced life. But the changed conditions of congregational life, its up-to-date administrative and spiritual management, with its modern religious training, which must be based on pedagogical principles and in conformity with our advanced age, expects to enlist their champions from the ranks of the buoyant, unshackled youth.

It is not an easy task to introduce innovations, no matter how great an improvement on existing conditions. Yet, each obstacle overcome is a triumph; each advancing step measures so much ground won from the domain of ignorance, and henceforth made tributary to the intellectual powers of the people at large.

Young men must consider well that they owe liabilities and duties to their race; that they have a destiny to fulfill, and that they must rise to a due appreciation of a higher calling.

I often wonder why older men, who have had all the honors in congregational life, hesitate to yield to the youth gradually the power of government. In the economy of Divine Providence, youth is endowed with peculiar attributes, on which the success of all great moral and social interests and enterprises is made dependent. I am sure, they would not thrust themselves upon the inheritance in reserve for them, without qualifications to preserve and improve it. While some may, now and then, be rash in their actions and decisions, they are, in general, highly impressed with the duties entrusted to them. They would not bring back upon the world the ignorance of the Dark Ages, nor reproduce upon the face of civilized society the great miseries, which the horrible crimes of war bring with them; and while they would bring us nearer to the prophetic peace between nation and nation, they would watch, that the lustre of their national character shall not be tarnished by deeds of cowardice, treachery or dishonor. They would recoil from the thought, that men without the requisite qualification of intelligence, incompetent or profligate, not imbued with the principle that peace is the greatest blessing to the progress and civilization of a nation, shall direct the wheels of a people or even of a single congregation.

The potent agencies upon which the existence, future and spiritual well-being of a Jewish community depends, must speedily come under the direction of younger men, who have formed their character, moral and intellectual, in our colleges and universities. It is true that many of them are wholly unconcerned about that future of Judaism in which they ought have so deep a stake, and for which they will be held responsible by future generations.

We place before the Jewish young men of this country only a very humble standard of duty and ambition, in urging them to such attainments which would infuse them with a pride, not alone to maintain in their present state the institutions of Jewish learning already established, but, to bring sacrifices to secure their existence and enlarge their efficiencies and usefulness.

Oppressed, persecuted, driven from country to country, the sufferings of our ancestors can hardly be vividly enough pictured to the imagination of our youth. Yea, it cost the precious life of millions of our fathers, to bequeath to their offspring a heritage, with which all the nations of the world have blessed themselves.

We trust that the Jewish youth, of this glorious land of ours, is not the offspring of a recreant generation which would make itself the reproach of noble ancestors and the scorn and by-word of history, but will, with youthful zeal and by personal example, inspire the growing-up generation to uphold our sublime tenets. Our young men must be dead to all high aspirations, who do not burn with shame at the thought of transmitting our religion to posterity enfeebled or dilapidated.

We admit that there is a volcanic energy in the enterprise of Jewish life at work; in the struggle for the attainment of religious knowledge; in the search for truth, and the improvement of morals. Many fine minds are concerned in bringing forth the product of the vast literature of Jewish science, which can not fail to promote the moral and mental illumination of our people. Still the American Jewish youth is expected to outstrip its predecessors.

It will be well for the young men of this generation, to act the part which awaits them without provoking unfavorable comparisons, and acquit themselves in the sight of their people and of history. None will deny credit to our forefathers, for being not alone a heroic, brave, intelligent and noble race, but fitted with an ideal dream and love to humanity at large, to

join the different races together for their common welfare, that nothing shall mar their earthly life, that each man may enjoy the days allotted to him in the blessedness of peace. Israel need not be ashamed of its past attainments, it is for us to continue the noble work, which to propagate is our destiny.

Do we need to remind our young people that, only through the strenuous exertions and virtues which our Jewish religion has infused into our race, have we attained the moral and social position which enables us to work for the redemption of our brethren living in lands where the rays of sunshine have yet to melt the hearts of the inhabitants to treat the Jew too as a brother?

It is the glory of Jewish young men of the present generation, that they have improved not alone in tolerance but have become educated, vigorous, laborious and enterprising men, not deficient either in literary attainments or intellectual vigor. However, something more than this will justly be expected of them.

Each member of the growing generation must consider himself a soldier in our ranks, and not shirk to do his share to uphold the religion which has given light and life to mankind, and which has raised the cultural state of the masses to its present elevated position.

The usefulness of our institutions of Jewish learning does not solely depend on their financial state, but mainly on their moral support. Our schools of learning are destined to act but an inglorious part, if with facilities, so many and even so rich, unknown to the schools of learning of older countries, they could do no more than send forth disciples who, at the beginning of their career, fail to find the moral support of the younger element.

The efficiency and usefulness of institutions of learning is precisely what the zeal, purity and intelligence of their supporters make it. If the rising generation is not impressed with the religious idea and the traditions of Israel to attend public worship, we can not but conclude, that the religious activities of a Jewish community remain at best stationary, without some new accession of moral and intellectual resources. Progress under the circumstances supposed is totally out of the question. Under these conditions, the Synagogue is only with difficulty able to hold its ground against the opposing forces of mixed marriages, Christian Science, Ethical Culture,

Skepticism, Gnosticism, the teachings of Atheism and that of modern philosophy, and the researches of physics, as well as against the temptations of the allurements of social prestige. All these forces being strengthened, if not directly caused, by the failure to attend public worship.

Ought not Young Israel come forward and give tangible evidence with their presence at public worship, that none of us need be ashamed to be an active member of a congregation, whose aim is to propagate the lofty tenets which have not outlived their usefulness in the uplift of mankind? If the rising generation will come forward, with the degree of piety and intelligence that belonged to their fathers, the cause of religion will not retrograde. They ought to contribute a proper share of interest to the spiritual and moral welfare of communal life. Their activities can not fail to bring new life and vivacity, and will quicken and multiply the energies of men and women of the congregation, to foster the religious training of the youth, which no doubt will infuse into their hearts a love and reverence for everything good and noble which elevates their character. Each germ of good or evil is hurried forward into rapid development by a highly stimulating process.

The actual state of morals in a community may be regarded as the true expression of the power of the moral and intellectual forces of a people's religion, and its religious improvements and enterprises. The proper function of the youth must therefore be, to diligently equip themselves as champions of the religion of their fathers, and interest themselves in the work and welfare of Jewish communal life.

Our boys and girls ought to become, after confirmation, regular junior members of our congregations, and as evidence of faith, good will and love to our cause, ought to contribute nominal dues for certain privileges enjoyed, which dues, could be eventually raised at reaching the age of 18 to 21, when they ought to become full fledged members.

Our educated young men and women must take a pride to aid our religious schools, and interest themselves that the pupils shall be trained under an enlightened system of education, which will make them conversant with our laws, customs, history and our high ideals.

Who can deny that religion is directly and greatly promotive of high intellectual excellence? It nurtures those virtues which are indispensable to the higher efforts of a cultivated mind. Of course, we ought not to overlook the fact

that, the most favorable and benignant impression for the future religious life of the youth is made amidst the sympathies and safeguards of home. In the family circle the youth is eager to satisfy his thirst for molding influences.

Often a few persons of deeper piety, stronger faith and larger views, might sweep away obstacles that retard progress and open a career of unexampled success. That, now and then, the impetus given by one true man, of enlarged conceptions of duty and burning zeal for his people and his religion, is able to communicate a new spirit to the masses that have for years scarcely given more than a sign of vitality, is evidenced by the life and work of the late Dr. Isaac M. Wise. American Judaism had just enough of moral power to maintain a bare existence to resist the pressure from without; it enjoys now an elevated position, which is not surpassed by any other religious body. It was Isaac M. Wise who aroused the American Jews to religious activity; it was his teaching which has animated them to a scholastic life and the pride of an elevated character.

What victories then might not be anticipated; what an enlargement of sphere for Judaism, could our young men be induced to gird themselves with strength, to put their highest energies in requisition for a revival of religious activities? It would be a rebirth of the Judaism enunciated by our prophets, which is the expression of Divine wisdom, announced to man, as the true method of life.

As to the congregational activities, it is to be deplored that the pride of men often thwarts their benevolent designs. There is a tendency in some larger cities, to gather the rich and the poor into separate folds, and establish through the membership of these Synagogues a distinction, utterly at variance with the spirit of Judaism. In these great centers of wealth, intelligence and influence, the separation between the classes is in many instances complete, and in many more, the process is rapidly progressive. Rich men, instead of associating themselves with their humble brethren to root out the causes of religious lethargy, combine to erect and to keep up magnificent edifices of worship in which membership or seats are too expensive for any but people of fortune, and from which their less favored brethren are as effectually excluded as though there were contagion in their presence. Thus the temple builds up a barrier between the rich and poor. Shall we come to the conclusion that a Jew's prestige depends upon the Synagogue

he is affiliated with? Can it be thought for a moment that such a state of things is desirable or in harmony and in the design of Judaism?

A religious community is responsible for the spiritual and moral improvement of its adherents. Aristocracy in religion is hypocrisy; it generates a spirit dangerous to the purity and perpetuity of our religion. Large as the seating capacities of the edifices of those exclusively wealthy congregations are, they have scarcely room for one-half of the families of their members, were they simultaneously to attend worship. Each of these congregations could, without the slightest inconvenience, bear the burthen to erect and maintain a few modest Synagogues, affiliated with theirs, or financially aid congregations doomed to struggle with the most embarrassing difficulties in many small communities. With the exception of the A. H. U. C. support a congregation in the Bronx, N. Y., and that the institution of the Free Synagogue, through the efforts of its leader, Dr. Steph. S. Wise, maintains three separate places of worship, we know of no rich congregation in the larger cities, which spend from \$10,000 to \$20,000, and much more, for its own congregational uses, that financially aids a struggling congregation in its neighborhood or elsewhere, to enable it to maintain a rabbi to institute regular services. This fact was deplored by Dr. Cyrus Adler at one of the meetings of the United Synagogues of America.

No Jew can indulge in the fancy that he is exempt from serving his race. Those of high social positions must come down from their exalted places of social and intellectual pride, ready to show that there is one place, the Temple, which knows no distinction between rich and poor, exalted and lowly. The rich must contribute their wealth; those of social standing their influence; the learned their wisdom; the poor their patient toil and sterling virtues, to make American Israel the standard of a religious community, whose faith in the God of Israel never falters, and whose pride it must be to raise their offspring to religious, virtuous and patriotic citizens. Only by the combination of all classes, and all talents, does human society prosper most.

Our young men ought to be aware of the unsound conditions which exist in our communal life and must rise to the responsibility of remedying this evil, if it is not to retard the religious progress of our people, and to hinder the moral elevation of our race.

It behooves the men, who, by their education as well as by their social and financial prestige and known generosity, are looked upon as the leaders of our people in this country, to consider this matter as one of the greatest and most important duty they are called upon to perform. The spirit of liberality must keep pace with the diffusion of wealth, to give pecuniary aid to such communities whose members have the good will but are restrained by financial difficulties to exercise their religious duties to posterity. The religious and moral achievements gained by this support will be not alone a pride of those individuals and wealthy congregations, who with munificence will undertake the novel plan to support small communities in the upkeep of a House of Worship, but will in no time influence every good and able Israelite to interest himself in the noble work, and encourage it with whatever aid each one can.

An expansion of our religious work will no doubt strengthen the purity and virtuous sentiments of our youth, and bring the most fruitful and blessed results in the history of American Israel. Here, then, is a favorable opportunity to work and lay a sound foundation to strengthen the walls of Jeshurun.

Let us be awake to the responsibilities which our forefathers have taken upon themselves and left to us as a heritage. As faithful stewards, we are accountable for the moral and religious growth of Israel, and we must not shirk our duty and neglect the spiritual training of our rising youth.

